

The End of Homework: How Homework Disrupts Families Overburdens Children and Limits Learning

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“Over and over again have I had to send my own children, in spite of their tears and remonstrances, to bed, long after the assigned tasks had ceased to have any educational value and had become the means of nervous exhaustion and agitation...” This complaint was not uttered by some dismayed parent of the 1990s. Rather, the speaker of these words was Francis A. Walker, a Civil War hero and the president—during the 1880s—of the Boston school board. Although popular wisdom and the cries of educational reformers such as the authors of 1983 *Nation at Risk* report seem to indicate that children are not receiving enough homework and that homework automatically produces more-successful students, the efficacy of homework has been the subject of debate in this country for at least a century.

In *The End of Homework*, Kralovec, former director of teacher education at the College of the Atlantic, and Buell, former associate editor of *The Progressive*, argue that homework traditionally has been seen as a mechanism for inculcating values such as self-discipline, responsibility, and the love of learning. There have been, however, national moments of doubt about how much good homework really does. For example, Francis Walker’s comments represented a nationwide campaign to abolish homework, which was seen as “an intrusion into family life” and a possible cause of risk to children’s physical and mental health. In 1900, Edward Bok, editor of *Ladies’ Home Journal*, called homework “A National Crime at the Feet of American Parents.” In the 1930s, the limiting of homework became a minor issue in the labor movement, and, in the 1960s, homework was seen as yet another symptom of the lengthening work day of all Americans.

Kralovec and Buell take the debate about homework into the present and argue that unduly large amounts of homework—four, five, even six hours a night for high-school students—cause problems such as lost opportunity to engage in nonacademic activities, a decrease in time spent with family and friends, the creation of loneliness and stress, and the accentuation of class differences.

The End of Homework concludes with recommendations about the amount of homework students should have. Elementary-school students should not be given any homework at all, while middle-school students should do about an hour of personal work after school, but on school grounds. Finally, time spent by high-school students on school and school-related activities should never exceed more than forty hours a week. These recommendations and *The End of Homework* as a whole will be provocative reading for educators, policy makers, and parents.

DOUGLAS W. TEXTER (July / August 2000)

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